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The Servant of the Gospel, Part 6

Romans 1:8-16, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers; Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you. For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established; That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was let hitherto,) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles. I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise. So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

Christ's Final Earthly Commission

Prior to His ascension, Christ exhorted the disciples with these words:

Acts 1:7-8, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own

authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

This is an interesting command widely discussed in commentaries, literature, and Bible studies. Truly, God’s will for His body is NOT for them to be prophets- people who give themselves to knowing times, seasons, or epochs. RATHER, it is God’s will for us to be His witnesses! Now is there a priority when it comes to this witness? Indeed there is!

Acts 1:8b, “...and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

The progression indicated by this command involved the disciples being faithful: first at home, in Jerusalem, where the disciples at that moment lived; then in their immediate community, Judea; then to the undesirables of their day, Samaria and then the furthest parts of the Roman Empire, the remotest part of the earth.

Now aside from this verse giving us a handy outline for the book of Acts:

- Acts 1-7: The Jerusalem/Judea Witness.
- Acts 8-11: The Samaria Witness.
- Acts 12-28: The “Remotest Part of the Earth” Witness.

The Jerusalem Priority

This passage and the rest of Scripture indicate that there is a priority when it comes to the gospel ministry. In fact, we see this priority reflected in Paul’s words in his opening salutation to the Romans. This morning, we are going to close out Paul’s introduction by discussing the “Jerusalem” to which we have been called when it comes to ministering the grace of God, our priority when it comes to the gospel ministry, our Jerusalem priority.

Romans 1:15, “Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.”

Though the epistle to the Romans is packed with some of the most profound theological truths imaginable, nevertheless this little verse ranks as one of the most surprising. To show you this, consider with me our assumptions when it comes to the object of gospel ministry.

Assumptions

When we think of those who need the gospel, who do we tend to think of? The lost! Indeed! It is the lost who most need to hear about Christ. As such we understand the passion that characterized Paul throughout his ministry.

Romans 15:20-21, “And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, that I might not build upon another man’s foundation; but as it is written, ‘They who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand.’”

Truly when we think of the gospel ministry, we rightly think of the lost and engaging the culture in which we live. We must be about “destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Paul had a passion to preach where Christ had not already been named.

The Gospel is for the Lost!

Romans 10:14-15, “How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!’”

It is not an overstatement to say that this verse coupled with the great commission has sent more people out as missionaries than any other verse in Scripture. Indeed! If the lost are going to be saved, someone must bring the gospel to them! Accordingly, when we think of the gospel, we tend to think in terms of the lost! It is a message which they need to hear! With that notice a second observation.

The Gospel is for the Recipients of this Letter, Romans 1:1, 7.

Romans 1:1, 7, “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called *as* an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God... to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called *as* saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

When Paul wrote this epistle, what was his primary audience; the saved or the unsaved? The primary audience was for the saved the body of Christ in Rome here identified as the beloved of God.

That is “God’s loved ones.” This refers to the intimate and tender love that God has for His people. Accordingly, it is a statement of that great POSITION that a participant in the Gospel has: They are “loved of God.” They are the ones God...

- “First loved,” 1 John 4:19.
- Has bestowed “His great love upon,” 1 John 3:1.
- Has “demonstrated His own love towards” through the cross, Romans 5:8.
- Has set His great love upon “even when we were dead in our transgressions,” Ephesians 2:4-5!

Such was the body to whom Paul wrote this epistle. They were “the beloved of God!” Yet they were also “called as saints.” Literally this could read, “saints by virtue of having been called.” When a person is savingly called by God they are “set apart” and so “separated” unto God. That’s the idea behind this word.

In the Bible, the word for “saint” is the same word used throughout Scripture for “holy.” Accordingly, being labeled a saint does NOT convey the idea of outstanding ethical achievement. Rather, it refers to being set apart unto God for His purpose and service! It means that you are wholly devoted to the Lord and so have been claimed by Him.

And so to whom was this epistle addressed? When Paul wrote this letter...

- He penned it for the children of God who love because they were first loved by God.
- He wrote it to a group of people who had been saved by grace through faith in Christ alone!
- He sent it to a church which already had received the gospel, loved it, and were bringing it to their community (cf. Philippians 1:14).

And that is what makes the passage at which we are looking surprising; the surprising passion.

The Surprising Passion, Romans 1:15.

Romans 1:15: “Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are IN ROME”

How is it that “the Apostle to the Gentiles” here longed with a great passion; a holy zeal, to preach the gospel to people who already were saved? At first glance, this doesn’t seem to make any sense! So why is there this aberration in Paul’s *modus operandi*?

First, you must see that this is no aberration. This is THE Biblical priority and hence the calling that rests upon each and every one of us as we contemplates engaging a culture for Christ. We indeed must have a passion for “Judea, Samaria, and the remotest part of the earth.” But we must begin with the “Jerusalem” in which we live; our **SAVED...**

- Families.
- Spouses.
- Children.
- Brothers and sisters in Christ.

This always has been the Biblical priority, when it comes to the selection of ones who would minister the gospel formally, notice that which constitutes part of the qualification.

1 Timothy 3:5, “If a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?”

Truly, when it comes to ministering in the Kingdom of God, the basis for determining a valid call is whether or not the man is serving Christ in his own home. You say, “That goes without saying. Of course a minister must be faithful when it comes to shepherding his own home.”

Indeed! But let’s add one more statement: A minister must be faithful when it comes to ministering the gospel to his own home. Accordingly the church leader must be “...the husband of one wife, having children who believe...”(Titus 1:6). We take this to mean much more than just children who have professed faith in Christ. One who would endeavor to be an engager of culture must be one who has ministered the gospel to his own family such that each individually while they’re in the household, relies upon Christ! When it comes to the Biblical priority for kingdom living we read:

1 Timothy 5:8, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.”

What good is it to bring the gospel to the nations if in doing so you neglect bringing the gospel to your own home? The priority has always been the home first, the Jerusalem in which we live!

Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law."

Recall that the idea behind the "secret things" in this text primarily references the future what God will and will not do with His people. What then are the "revealed things"? The gospel- the word of God! To whom then does the gospel belong? They belong "belong to us and to our sons forever."

From this and much more we conclude that the gospel is intended first and foremost for the believer! In the words of Paul, "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16)!

The Covenant of Works

You say, "How is this so? How is it that the apostle to the Gentiles longed to go to Rome to preach the gospel first to the believers there?" Consider the following, the gospel is a message first and foremost for the Christian on account of the Covenant of Works.

Genesis 2:15-17, "Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.'"

In John Murray's treatment of creation, he makes the following observation...

"Man has affinity with his non-animate environment, with the ground on which he walks and from which, to a large extent, he derives his sustenance, the ground which it is his task to till, dress, and subdue. There is congruity between man and his environment."

In other words, Murray is saying that when God made man, He formed him in such a way that he fits the world that God made. He is not an alien, but one who corresponds to the environment in which he lives. That is why, for example, there are so many similarities between the gestational stages of a dog, a bear, a bird, etc., and a human. If the creation account found in Genesis is true, we would expect nothing different!

Now if Murray's observation is correct, and we think it is, then it only stands to reason that when God created man, placed him in the garden, and charged him with the Covenant of Works, there must also be, by necessity, a built-in propensity to relate to the Lord on the basis of their conduct. At the beginning, God deigned to enter into a relationship with man, a relationship which was predicated on the actions of man. If Adam obeyed God, the relationship would continue. If Adam disobeyed, the relationship would end.

Accordingly part and parcel of our creation is an outlook which endeavors to relate to God on the basis of our conduct. That is why a universal belief of mankind is that they can earn God's favor by their actions. This is a belief which transcends cultures, people groups, and the ages!

Does salvation alter this aspect of man's make-up? Not any more than it changes the gestational stages in our development, our digestive system, the way our cells develop and multiply, etc. So though we are saved by grace through faith, we still have the fundamental inclination to relate to God on the basis of our conduct. Consider...

Romans 10:2-3, "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness [that is, the imputed righteousness of Christ granted to us on account of the cross], and seeking to establish their own [which is what the covenant of works was all about- the maintaining of one's righteousness before God], they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God."

Did you get that? Paul here is describing the fundamental passion of the child of God living in his day: they had a passion to establish their own righteousness- which means through their...

- Bible reading.
- Church attendance.
- Witnessing.
- Walk.
- Obedience.

They endeavored to earn the approval of God! That is why when Christ came to the earth and preached salvation by grace, the Old Testament people of God flatly refused Him; much the way you and I do when we...

- Expect God to bless us because we have done such and such.
- Think that now that we have done our part, God will do His.
- Believe that God's approval is partly based on what we do.

Our Propensity to Works Righteousness

From all of this I hope you see why Paul was so eager to preach the gospel to the Christians in Rome. Because of our constitution, the Christian naturally will deny it. And this brings us to another observation. The gospel is a message first and foremost for the Christian on account of our propensity. Listen to Paul's exhortation to a church struggling with legalism:

Galatians 2:18-19, "For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God."

Paul wrote this to a church which had abandoned the life of faith. Following Paul's first missionary journey, false preachers, Judaizers, crept into the churches in Galatia. These Judaizers; Jews who had accepted Christ, yet still maintained that the way to get to the New Testament was through the Old Testament and so preached circumcision as a necessary precondition of salvation, believed that it was their calling to correct the false teaching of Paul.

Well as Paul headed toward the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, word was given to him that many of the Gentiles in Galatia were in the process of adding circumcision to the cross-work of Christ. Hence Paul

wrote in his epistle to the Galatians.

Galatians 5:2-3, "Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law."

Now to counteract the Judaizer's teaching, Paul exhorted the Galatians in our text along two lines; first, they must see that through the law the Christian dies to law-keeping as the basis for God's approval.

Galatians 2:19, "For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God."

Secondly, if there is any lethal transgression to the faith of a believer it is seeking to relate to God on the basis of their conduct.

Galatians 2:18, "For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor."

Paul warns the Galatians against "rebuilding the system of works-righteousness." This indicates that there always will be a propensity for the believer to do just that. Commands are not given when there is no threat of violation. Never are we commanded in Scripture to breathe. Never do we read, "Whatever you do, don't forget to eat!" The reason a command exists indicates that as Christians we are going to struggle when it comes to fulfilling it.

Accordingly for Paul to warn the believers in Galatia about falling into "works righteousness" in their walk with Christ indicates that this is a very real threat to our faith. From all of this we now see why Paul was so eager to preach the gospel to the Christians in Rome. Of all people, we need it first and foremost!

Insofar as that is correct, then today each and everyone of us has received a charge not simply to long, but actually to...

- Preach the gospel to those in our Jerusalem.
- Live the gospel in the Jerusalem in which we dwell.

This means that we must make it our aim ever and always to live in light of the gospel OURSELVES! We must watch over our hearts diligently (Proverbs 4:23). Christian, remember our hearts indeed are an idol factory endeavoring to produce monuments for the Lord regarding our own achievements. If we are not careful and so ever vigilant, we will rebuild again what Christ destroyed at the cross. We will...

- Live as though God were our debtor.
- Think that what we do can earn the good pleasure of God.
- Derive salvific satisfaction from the labors of our hands- believing that God most certainly is impressed by our actions.
- Accuse God of wrong-doing when things don't go our way.
- Shy away from fellowship with the Lord until our lives are cleaned up.
- Feel dirty and unacceptable before the Lord in light of our failure.

Oh Christian, preach the gospel to your soul daily! Engage your fleshly mind to discover any "lofty thing

raised up against the knowledge of Christ,” and then destroy them with the gospel (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Yet it doesn't end here, we must take seriously the calling/duty/responsibility to bring the gospel to those in the Jerusalem in which we live. Paul wrote,

2 Corinthians 2:14-16a, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life...”

Do you understand that God is rather serious about us sharing the gospel with one another? This isn't just one of many activities expected of us as God's children; it is the ONLY activity...

- Living the gospel.
- Preaching the gospel.
- Enjoying the gospel.
- Exalting the gospel.

When we do this ever mindful of...

- The Lost- we call it evangelism!
- Christ- we call it worship!
- God's People, we call it fellowship!

This is what life is all about! We were saved,

Ephesians 1:6, “To the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.”

Accordingly, what would be the divine commentary on these situations?

- A husband who neglected this call when it came to his wife in the name of conquering a career or having a house that is in order?
- Parents who neglected this call when it came to their children in the name of having their children obey, look good as a family, or be well-educated?
- A church body which neglected this call when it came to one another in the name of preserving one's reputation, convenience, or the preoccupation with self?

Such flagrant disregard for the gospel sickened the Lord when He walked the earth. Oh Christian, how can it not sicken Him now?!

But that's where it has come to in many marriages, families, and churches. We do not live the gospel, we...

- Bite and devour one another (Galatians 5:15a).
- Consume each other (Galatians 5:15b).

- Our homes, marriages, and churches are not an environment where sinners can address their sin, where the gospel is understood, and where grace is lived, given, and received.

Consider the Church as it exists today. We have unwittingly developed a toxic church culture where performance is god, where grace is unnecessary, and so our fellowship is phony.

A secondary infection is when the body in a weakened or vulnerable state becomes susceptible to an illness where otherwise it wouldn't be. A common secondary infection among those suffering with Aids is a chronic cold.

On account of our refusal to be a church that lives by grace, many secondary infections have set in and are emasculating our ability to be a place where genuine growth takes place. For example, though the gospel presupposes that each and everyone of us here are sinners, nevertheless there are certain struggles that will violate our fellowship, and I'm not talking about unrepentant sin, but the sin that love is intended to cover (1 Peter 4:8)!

What could that possibly be? Typically they are not all struggles, but those which are of the big three...

- The Sixth Commandment- killing, and so hatred, resentment, and anger.
- The Seventh Commandment- adultery, and so sex-sin in any form.
- The Eight Commandment- the stealing other people's property, honor or praise.

Accordingly, take a gentleman who teaches Sunday school or has any authority over a child. Allow him to confess a struggle with the Seventh Commandment, pornography, and what do we typically do? We replace him. This means that we teach folks that if we are tempted in any way with pornography we better not tell anyone about it. The result of this is that the tempted man is left to deal with his sin alone lest he confess a struggle and so be disqualified!

Now when one isolates a sinner and tells him to deal with his sin alone in time the greater sin becomes....

- The wife struggling with anger toward her spouse in time may become bitter.
- The man struggling with temptation when it comes to a secretary in time may commit adultery.
- The child struggling with doubts about the Lord in time may forsake the faith.

Do you see how toxic our church, families, and walks have become? We don't understand the gospel and so we live to rebuild what was destroyed at the cross. We don't understand grace, and so as husbands, parents, and church members we hold one another to a standard that only Christ could meet. We don't understand God's calling, and so we use our positions to demand obedience rather than to lay our lives down for it. And so though we be in a crowded room, we are left alone to address the deepest struggles of life- Sin.

Family of God, I don't want to live in a house or a church where sinners are left alone to deal with their sin. Paul didn't (Romans 1:15)! And I don't think you do either. Accordingly, it behooves each and everyone saved by grace to kindle afresh the passion, conviction, and desire, "...to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome!"

This rightly is the passion of the servant of God!

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on November 15, 2009. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.